

# ***Santa Clara County's Refugee Program: Service Provision Strategies for Limited English Proficient and Monolingual Populations***

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## **Introduction**

Alameda County, like many other jurisdictions across the country, is looking for effective means to assist limited English proficient or monolingual Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) recipients. According to 2000 Census data, approximately 14 million, or nearly 9.5% of all working age adults in the United States, either did not speak English or spoke it less than “very well.”<sup>1</sup> In California, it is estimated that 12% of the adult population have limited English proficiency (LEP). The Center of Law and Social Policy (CLASP) Report: *Expanding Employment Prospects for Adults with Limited English Skills*, states, “Adults with limited English skills clearly need to improve their English language abilities and acquire specific job skills if they are going to advance in the labor market.”

In light of time limits and stricter federal rules regarding participation requirements, the dilemma becomes how do we as social services agencies face the challenge in how best to assist the LEP and monolingual population to transition to self-sufficiency.

The purpose of this case study is to research and identify effective service provision strategies for LEP and monolingual populations. Alameda County Social Services Agency serves a significant number of LEP and monolingual individuals spread throughout the county. The county has a limited number of service providers able to meet their specialized needs. This situation is complicated by the fact that as an under equity county there are limited resources. My

search for effective strategies led me to Santa Clara Social Services Agency because they provide these services through their network of refugee services providers.

## **History**

Santa Clara County's Refugee Program was established in 1984 and serves refugees,<sup>2</sup> asylees, victims of trafficking, victims of severe torture and other LEP clients. In 1980 federal legislation was enacted under the Refugee Act to provide funds to states and counties impacted by refugee resettlement. These refugee funds are allocated for cash aid, medical benefits, employment and social services in order to assist refugees in becoming economically sufficient. Alameda and Santa Clara are two of thirteen California counties who operate Refugee Programs.

The federal funding sources for the Refugee Program are Targeted Assistance (TA) and Refugee Employment Social Services (RESS). Over the past decade, both Santa Clara and Alameda Counties have seen a decline in the number of refugees settling in their counties, which has caused a drastic drop in funding. As a result, Santa Clara County's operating budget for refugee services has gone from a \$4 million operating budget during the 1990s to \$670,000 in 2007.<sup>3</sup> Alameda County has also encountered a drop in funding and has lost eligibility

<sup>1</sup>[www.migrationinformation.org](http://www.migrationinformation.org)

<sup>2</sup>Refugees are individuals who are unable to return to their country of origin because of persecution or a well founded fear of persecution on account of race, religion, nationality, membership in a particular group or political opinion. Refugees in this case study are intended to include all asylees, victims of trafficking, and victims of severe torture.

<sup>3</sup>Employment Services Bureau Annual Report of 2007

for TA. To bridge the gap in funding, Santa Clara County combined TA and RESS funding with CalWORKs. Through community collaborations they streamlined their Refugee Program and increased its capacity to offer additional social adjustment, linguistic and cultural competency services to refugees and other LEP and monolingual populations.

### **Santa Clara County's Refugee Program**

Within the Refugee Program, LEP individuals or refugees receive cash assistance through the Refugee Cash Assistance (RCA) or California Work Opportunity and Responsibility to Kids (CalWORKs) programs. Newly arrived refugees with no children and who are not eligible for other public assistance may be eligible for RCA, which is an 8 month time-limited program. Individuals and newly arrived refugees with children may be eligible for cash and medical assistance through CalWORKs, subject to a 60 month time-limit. Both the RCA and CalWORKs programs have work participation requirements and employment services components that provide an array of work activities and support services. Only RCA and CalWORKs recipients who are able to work are engaged in employment services provided through these programs.

Santa Clara County currently funds six contractors to provide both employment and training activities and social adjustment services for its Refugee Program. The combined agencies have been awarded \$900,000 and have capacity to provide services in over 30 languages (see appendix for languages). Contractors must ensure they hire qualified staff that possesses the linguistic and cultural competence to serve target populations. Additionally, contractors must meet well defined performance standards. According to Phaivanh Khowong, Employment Program Manager, outcomes for federal fiscal year 2007 include serving 295 clients and placing 57% of these clients in employment at an average wage rate of \$9.68 an hour.

To ensure effective service delivery, performance is monitored very closely. In addition to monitoring visits, Santa Clara County sends a letter to each con-

tractor regarding its performance on a bi-monthly basis and monthly if a contractor is experiencing difficulty in meeting performance standards. This frequent reporting process enables both Santa Clara County and the providers to identify performance issues and respond to them in a timely manner.

### **Service Delivery Model**

The Central Intake Unit (CIU) provides an orientation linking CalWORKs, RCA refugees, or LEP clients to the appropriate service provider. This unit is staffed with a refugee specialist and employment technician, and they work closely with providers to ensure program and contract requirements are met.

Services focus on participants learning the skills and vocabulary necessary in order to obtain the most suitable employment. Contractor programs are structured to be full time (35 hours per week) and open-entry with a maximum six-month duration. The curriculum is wide-ranging, including life skills, computer training, and American work culture. Other components are assessment, job readiness, vocational counseling, employment plan development, job placement and retention support. While clients work on improving language skills, they learn how to conduct an effective job search, write a resume, and develop interviewing skills. Through one-on-one counseling clients engage in career exploration and learn the importance of setting long-term and short-term goals. For program participants who are placed in employment, providers continue to play a role in monitoring progress on the job ensuring successful retention. If clients are not placed in employment, then they are referred back to the CIU for referral to the next appropriate activity or the case is closed due to expiration of aid.

### **Contractor Visit— Jewish Family Services of Silicon Valley**

I had an opportunity to visit one of the providers, Jewish Family Services of Silicon Valley. Their service team is comprised of case managers, English as a Second Language (ESL) instructors and job developers. They provide services to individuals from Iran

and a number of African countries. The organization is guided by a “work first” philosophy that strongly emphasizes the benefits of working while encouraging career advancement through continuing education. Program participants are thoroughly assessed to determine English literacy, job skills and interests, and cultural competency. Intensive one-on-one case management and career counseling are provided to participants with the goals of placing them in employment and aiding them in overcoming barriers to self-sufficiency.

The organization utilizes technology to promote English language learning. The computer lab has eight computers and during my visit it was filled with individuals practicing their English skills. Jewish Family Services successfully applied for an International Business Machines (IBM) grant that allows them to utilize IBM’s Reading Companion software. It is a web-based literacy program that uses novel speech-recognition technology to help adults and children gain and increase literacy skills.<sup>4</sup>

### **Collaborations**

Santa Clara County believes that collaborations with the community significantly enhance the effectiveness of their refugee programs. The goals of these collaborations are consistent communication, resource sharing and continuous program improvement.

The County works closely with the Refugee and Immigrant Forum of Santa Clara. The forum is comprised of over 20 members (see appendix) from county and city governments, non-profit organizations, resettlement agencies, contracted providers and other community partners who are concerned about the issues involving the refugee and immigrant population. This group meets monthly to discuss program issues, develop strategies, solve problems, share immigration trends, and discuss community resources and events.

According to the chairperson, Mylene Madrid Mei of Santa Clara Valley Health and Hospital System, the forum seeks to find solutions for challenges

encountered by refugees in Santa Clara County. Their accomplishments include:

- coordinating an annual community event for refugees—World Refugee Day;
- obtaining funds for the mental health needs of the refugee community through continuous involvement in the Mental Health Services Act activities; and
- providing training to Santa Clara County eligibility workers regarding benefits for refugees, asylees, victims of trafficking, domestic violence, and awareness of client experiences.

In addition to the forum, Santa Clara County chairs a quarterly meeting for all contracted refugee providers. The meeting’s focus is on performance outcomes, Work Participation Rate, program updates, data and community resources.

### **Conclusion**

Santa Clara County is operating and managing a program that is effective in connecting the refugee and LEP population to employment. Their approach in leveraging CalWORKs funding with RESS and TA funding streams enables them to sustain services while expanding capacity of their Refugee Program to serve CalWORKs recipients. Santa Clara County’s commitment to collaborations creates opportunities for the community to be engaged in problem identification and resolution concerning the challenges the county and refugee and LEP population face. Their overall program design, the inclusion of a wide range of key employment and training components and close contract monitoring, all contribute to the success of Santa Clara’s Refugee Program.

### **Recommendations for Alameda County**

Alameda County Social Services Agency is in the process of restructuring its Employment Services program. Much thought and discussion has been given to how services can be enhanced for the LEP and monolingual populations. County data show that 20% of our CalWORKs caseload is LEP and monolingual, and we are projected to serve on average 89 individuals in the RCA program.

<sup>4</sup>[www.readingcompanion.org](http://www.readingcompanion.org)

Traditionally Alameda County has funded a separate Refugee Services program. Current funding for the refugee program is approximately \$142,000, and we contract with two (2) refugee providers.

If Alameda County would like to enhance and increase employment and social services for the LEP and monolingual populations the following recommendations should be considered:

- Explore the concept of blending CalWORKs and RESS funding in order to increase the service capacity in Alameda County's Refugee Program. By implementing such a strategy, both refugees and CalWORKs recipients would benefit. A new pathway of specialized services would be created for CalWORKs recipients with language barriers. Refugee providers would receive increased funding to implement an overall improved program serving refugees.
- Identify successful service strategies that meet both RCA and CalWORKs program requirements and have a proven track record in assisting limited English and monolingual individuals to enter the labor market. The appropriate combination of English language, job skills and job search training, and intensive case management services are critical components in program design.
- Initiate new and/or strengthen partnerships and collaborations that will help facilitate problem identification and resolution, resource sharing, and program improvement.
- Increase performance goals and monitor performance more frequently to ensure performance goals are being achieved.

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## APPENDIX

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### Language Capacity for Combined Refugee Providers

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Amhari	Italian
Arabic	Iraqi
Assyrian	Laotian
Bosnian	Mandarin
Burmese	Nepalese
Croatian	Persian
Dinka	Serbo-Croatian
Dari	Somali
Chinese	Swahili
Farsi	Spanish
French	Tagalog
German	Thai
Greek	Russian
Hebrew	Ukranian
Hindi	Vietnamese

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Source: Employment Services Bureau 2007

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### Refugee and Immigrant Forum Membership

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American Red Cross	Vietnamese Voluntary Foundation, Inc.
Asian American for Community Involvement	Immigrant Resettlement Cultural Center
Asian Law Alliance	International Rescue Committee
Bay Area Somali Community	Jewish Family Services
Blue Cross of California	Lenders for Community Development
Catholic Charities	Santa Clara County Office of Human Relations
Center of Employment Training	Santa Clara County Social Services Agency
Ethiopian Community Services	Santa Clara Family Health Plan
Gardner Family Care Corporation	Individuals

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Source: Agenda for Refugee and Immigrant Forum Meeting